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ABSTRACT

The use of student journals in teaching introductory psychology was investigated at Kansas State University. Students in both a small honors class and a large general psychology lecture were asked to keep a journal with at least one entry weekly. While they were encouraged to relate course material to their own lives, nothing was restricted. The instructor commented in the journals but did not grade them; the student was given credit for turning in the journal. Some principles for teacher response to the journals are as follows: respond prolifically, affirm the student, reassure the student that he/she is normal, and use questions rather than imperatives. The content and tone of the journals varied widely but several classes of entries were identified: an account or log of activities in the life of the students; direct relation of class material to own experience; reflections on self; and in many cases the teacher-reader became a significant person for the student in the sense of someone to react to his or her thoughts. Among the problems in using the journals are the great amount of time required to read the journals, the student who cannot or will not think of very much to say, and the student who says too much (is seriously troubled and needs counseling or other professional help). Advantages of this approach include: the practice in writing can help sharpen a student's composing and editing skills; course concepts may be better understood; students may better understand themselves; and the teacher-student relationship may be improved. The use of journals in four other types of psychology classes (psycholinguistics, psychology of mass communication, information processing, and problem-solving and decision-making) is briefly noted. (SW)

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The Use of Student Journals in Teaching Psychology

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Abstract

This paper shows how student journals may be used in teaching introductory psychology. It is argued that such autobiographical writing can be an important avenue to learning about oneself and about the course material in psychology. Students in both a small honors class and a large general psychology lecture were asked to keep a journal with at least one entry weekly. While they were encouraged to relate course material to their own lives, nothing was "off limits." One of the most important aspects of using journals is the feedback given to students. Techniques for the teacher commenting in journals are discussed. Several different classes of journal entries are identified. Problems in using journals are discussed, with suggestions for how to deal with these potential difficulties. Several gains for the student are highlighted. Finally, the use of journals in four other types of psychology classes is very briefly discussed.

The Use of Student Journals in Teaching Psychology

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While there is much lip service given to the idea that the study of psychology in general, and introductory psychology in particular, should be an important means of learning about oneself, specific techniques for implementing such a goal are considerably scarcer. One technique offering considerable promise in this regard is the use of journals.

Allport (1942) considered a journal as a "topical autobiography," i.e., a "short discontinuous personal document which represents the excerpting from an individual's life of a special class of events" (Hettich, 1976), such as those related to a particular psychology course. There is only a very limited literature on the use of journals in teaching psychology, notably Hettich (1976, 1980) and a paper by Jung (1972) on the use of a related form, the autobiography, in a personality class. The present paper will examine the actual use of such a journal in an introductory psychology course.

Implementation

Journals were required from the 27 students enrolled in the Honors section of General Psychology at Kansas State University. Students were recruited into this course largely by the academic counselors in the university's College of Arts and Sciences. Such students were clearly considerably above average in both ability and motivation. There were 18 first-semester freshmen and nine sophomores and juniors. The following semester journals were used in a large regular lecture class of 200; in this case journals were read by several student assistants, each of whom taught a recitation section of 20 once a week.

Students were asked to keep the journal for the semester, either in a separate spiral notebook or a separate section of their class notebook. They were encouraged to write thoughts they had relating the course material to themselves and others they knew. In addition, they were invited to write anything else at all that they cared to write. All entries were to be dated and only the instructor or teaching assistant would read the journals. They were collected once a week for the entire semester, with the only requirement being that there must be at least one new entry there each week. The instructor commented in the journals but did not grade them; the student was merely given credit for turning it in. Any type of grading procedure was considered inconsistent with fostering the desired climate of openness and trust that is essential for the success of journals in teaching.

Students were completely on their own in choosing what to write in their journals, with the following exceptions: 1) The instructor sometimes suggested in the course of class discussion certain topics students might wish to explore further in their journals, but it was made clear that this was not an assignment to do so. 2) In commenting in the journals the instructor sometimes made a suggestion such as "interesting insight. You may wish to explore this further in later entries." 3) The only specific topical assignment during the semester was a surprise request made the next-to-last week of the semester to conclude the journal by rereading the entire journal for the semester and reacting to it in the last entry. To initiate thinking on this, students were invited to react to questions such as "who is this person?", "what make you tick?", "what are your greatest hopes, gifts, and fears?", and "how have you grown and changed this semester?"

Commenting on the Journals

One of the most important aspects of learning through journals is the teacher's comments in the journal. Nothing will stifle the desired openness and

trust faster than the wrong kind of feedback. As commenter in the journal, the teacher takes on a "trusted adult" role, somewhat different from his/her usual role as the classroom authority figure of great knowledge. It may take some work and time to have the student accept this second role of the instructor. Some principles used to respond to journals and encourage this kind of acceptance include:

1) Respond Prolifically. While there are sometimes entries to which the instructor feels there is very little to respond to, most times that is not the case. If the students see the journals are being carefully read, that in itself, especially with the right type of comments, is much appreciated.

2) Affirm the Student. Every student needs affirmation in some way. Especially for the student just beginning college away from home for the first time, the need for a listening and affirming trusting adult can be great. Many of my remarks in journals were comments like "good for you, David," "you sound like a warm and sensitive friend, Kathy; your parents must be very proud of you," or "I'm impressed with the careful way that you worked through this decision in your mind, John."

3) Reassure the Student that He/She is Normal. Sometimes students can feel very "strange" and even will write direct questions like "what's wrong with me anyway?" To most such explicit or implicit queries I could honestly say, "nothing, your reaction to this situation sounds very normal to me." Even students in very abnormal situations may often be reassured that they are reacting in a normal way to that difficult situation. Sometimes such student comments could best be answered by a comment drawing on the teacher's own experience such as "I think that's very natural to feel both angry and guilty in this kind of situation. I remember feeling the same way once when I had a roommate like your friend."

4) Use Questions Rather than Imperatives. If a challenge or redirection is called for, it can be offered in a relatively nonthreatening fashion in the form

of a question. For example, "have you ever tried talking to your dad about this?" communicates the same suggestion as "talk to your dad about this." As well as removing the teacher farther from the authority role, the fact that the student must generate the answer to the question assures that it will be processed to a deeper level (cf. Jacoby, 1978; Slamecka & Graf, 1978) and thus have a greater cognitive impact. Also, if the teacher's suggestion is aversive, threatening, or for some unforeseen reason just plain inappropriate, it is easier for the student to deal with it in the form of a question than as an imperative. Also, since most teachers are not qualified psychotherapists, it would be inappropriate to give directives on how the student should live his/her life anyway. In fact, specifically telling students what to do in interpersonal situations was scrupulously avoided, though no doubt my opinions and biases came through.

This method of commenting apparently was successful, judging from the students' feedback at the end of the semester. When asked in the context of an evaluation of the class what they had thought about the comments in the journals, 57% of the honors students chose the "comments given were helpful as they were" response option, while 22% said they would "prefer more comments" and no one said they would "prefer fewer comments" or "prefer a different type of comment" (21% responded "don't care or no opinion" or did not respond).

What They Wrote About

The content and tone of the jounals varied widely but several classes of entries may be noted:

1) Recording of Events. Some entries were largely an account or log of activities in the life of the students, such as the party they went to last night, who was there, and what they did. A few students' journals were primarily such entries, sometimes in great depth. Such entries tended to elicit the fewest comments from the instructor.

2) Direct Relation of Class Material to Own Experience. This type of entry was quite common. The following is a typical example.

> I was thinking about sex roles that we talked about in class today. In my family I can see that my oldest brother is a real traditional macho guy, or at least that's how most people see him. My little brother though, is probably more androgynous. I never thought about that difference before, but I guess that's what he is. Maybe my parents raised him differently after having us girls in the middle.

3) Reflections on Self. These were some of the most touching and memorable entries. For example, several students turned 18 during the semester and reflected about themselves on the threshold of adulthood:

> Well, I celebrated my 18th birthday yesterday. My parents called and that was real nice. It's the first time I've been away from them on my birthday. I guess I'm supposed to be an adult now. That's a little scary. I guess I don't really need my parents anymore, but it sure is nice to know they are always there. I'm not sure I'm really ready to be an adult, but I guess I'm not a kid any more.

Sometimes the relating of an event can be told as a touching reflection on oneself:

> My dad came up last weekend for Dad's Day. It was fun. A bunch of us went down to Jack's to play pool and drink beer. It was the first time I ever drank beer with my dad. Oh, I did it a lot with friends in high school but never at home. I guess he thought it was okay but it felt a little weird. It was like he was my friend instead of my dad.

4) Catharsis. In many cases the teacher-reader became a significant person for the student in the sense of someone to react to his or her thoughts. For example, the journals often became sounding boards for frustrations about roommates, family members, campus happenings, or other cases where the world seemed to be moving too fast even for an eighteen-year-old. Some students came to use the journal pages to express thoughts and feelings they had never shared with anyone before, perhaps even themselves.

Problems in Using the Journals

In spite of their many advantages, some problems in using journals may be raised. One frequently mentioned drawback is the great amount of time required to read the journals. It certainly does take time but much less than is required for reading most written student work. The fact it is not graded saves time by eliminating the stage of deciding what mark to give it. Many entries are such that not much response is even called for or probably desired; thus a brief phrase at the end may be sufficient. With my class I had determined in advance I would make no comments on editing skills such as spelling, punctuation, usage, grammar, etc., unless specifically asked to do so. Ignoring these factors also removes a tremendous burden from the response process, as well as encouraging the student to focus more on thoughts and ideas than on mechanics. With my Honors class I spent about 15-30 minutes shortly after each class period reading journals, which were turned in weekly with one-third of the class turning them in each day. While some students wrote 3-4 pages per week, some wrote only a brief paragraph, with the average being about a page. Also, journals were fun to read, far more enjoyable than any other type of student writing I have used. Still, of course, they are workable in a large lecture class only with the aid of teaching assistants. Also, they do not have

to be read as often as weekly, though at least monthly is highly desirable.

Another problem in using journals is the student who can't or won't think of very much to say. Some students just don't feel comfortable expressing very personal thoughts and this privacy should be respected. I would never, for example, make a comment like "very interesting, Ken, but can you give me a more personal feeling about this?", unless that student had already written on that deeper level and clearly felt comfortable with it. Some students later reflected that their first reaction to the journal requirement was a negative one of feeling their privacy was being threatened. Later, however, these students either realized that I was not insisting on any particular level of sharing or they decided on their own to "open up" anyhow. Such students can often benefit from the in-class suggestions of journal topics.

A potential, though probably very infrequent, concern would be the opposite, i.e., the student saying too much. Although this did not happen in my class, the teacher would have to be sensitive to individual needs and be able to refer a seriously troubled student elsewhere for counseling or other professional help. While the journal can sometimes be a positive cathartic experience, it should not be considered a substitute for psychotherapy, if such is required.

What is Gained

1) Improved Skills in Writing. The mere practice in writing that much over a semester cannot help but sharpen a student's composing and editing skills. Perhaps even more importantly, it may help the student with the negative attitude toward writing discover that writing is possible, useful, and maybe even fun.

2) Better Understanding of Course Concepts. The fact that one must work to apply the course concepts to one's own experience insures that they will be thought about more deeply and understood better.

3) Better Understanding of Oneself. Students expressed that they had achieved a lot of self-insight from the journals, especially from rereading and reacting to them at the end of the semester. A great advantage of writing is that it provides a record of one's thoughts that may be read later to achieve a clearer understanding of one's changes over time.

4) Better Teacher-Student Relationship. Through the journals the student and teacher can come to know each other better than is possible in most classes. Both may self-disclose more than they typically do in the classroom. Knowing each student better will allow the teacher to tailor the class better for the individuals in it. The teacher may gain new perspectives from the students' refutation of his/her ideas and be able to offer the student new perspectives through his/her comments in the journal.

Evaluation

When the honors students were asked at the end of the semester to rate the overall value of the journal, the responses were as follows: "a waste of time"--13%, "only occasionally helpful"--9%, "somewhat helpful"--26%, "usually pretty helpful"--22%, and "very valuable"--26%. This would seem to be general support for the students' impression of the value of this technique.

Another type of support, albeit anecdotal, is also fairly compelling. In their final entry, many students voluntarily offered unsolicited comments about how helpful keeping the journal had been. Many stated they intended to continue keeping it after the class had ended. For example, an engineering student wrote:

> This journal has been a good source of therapy. There are some things you have to tell somebody but you don't want to tell anybody. Writing it out in a journal solves the problem rather

neatly. I hope to continue keeping one even though it will no longer be an assignment. This will, I believe, be one of the most valuable things to me to result from this class and in fact from my whole schooling.

Postcript: Applications in Other Classes

Although the main thrust of this paper has been the use of journals in teaching introductory psychology, journals have been used in different ways in upper-level courses. Some of my own experiences with such journals follow briefly.

Psycholinguistics

One goal in teaching a psycholinguistics course is to increase the students' general sensitivity to various aspects of language. The purpose of the language journal assignment is to help meet this goal, through maintaining an ongoing collection of interesting, humorous, unusual, or especially pleasant uses of language. These may be copied into the journal or cut and pasted there directly from the original source. Each student keeps his/her own collection throughout the semester.

Psychology of Mass Communication

Students in this class were asked to keep a media journal, with at least one weekly entry containing interesting examples of media reporting, personal reactions to or reflections on media coverage, reactions to class discussion or readings, and/or comments on one's own media use. The purpose was to increase their sensitivity to mass media and to look at these media and their own media habits more deeply and critically.

Information Processing

Students in this upper-level undergraduate cognitive psychology course were occasionally asked to take the last few minutes of class to explore further in

writing the topic of the lecture, by relating it to their own experience, e.g., "Explain some ways you have used imagery in your own life," or "Make up a mnemonic to remember the names of the students in this class."

Problem Solving and Decision Making

Students in this practical problem solving course kept a semester-long journal exploring different ways to conceptualize, attack, or solve a real problem they were facing in their own lives. They applied relevant course concepts to their chosen problem, e.g., perceptual restructuring, subgoal identification, multiattribute utility analysis, or heuristics used in decision-making.

Footnote

This paper was presented at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Meeting in Denver, May 1981.

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